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KUWAIT-IRAN RELATIONS

SUBJECT: SPEAKER AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS CHAIRMAN ON IRAQ,
IRAN, LEBANON, AND KUWAIT DOMESTIC POLITICS

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C/NF) Summary: During separate meetings December 6 with the Ambassador, Speaker of Parliament Jassem Al-Khorafi and the Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman, Mohammed Al-Sager, shared their views on regional and domestic political issues. Al-Khorafi welcomed the President's recent meetings with Iraqi leaders, but urged the U.S. to make it clear to Arab publics that it was listening to Arab leaders rather than telling them what to do. He also reported on his recent visit to Iran and said that during a meeting with him Ahmadinejad "went out of his way" to emphasize the peaceful nature and intentions of Iran's nuclear program. He noted with some surprise evidence of "strong contacts" between Russia and Iran. On Lebanon, Al-Khorafi encouraged the U.S. to play a more active role with Saudi Arabia and Syria to prevent an escalation of tensions. Al-Sager agreed with the past comments of King Abdullah of Jordan that "the Shi'a, especially Iran, are trying to take control of the Arab world." Both Al-Khorafi and Al-Sager downplayed the likelihood of an unconstitutional dissolution of the Kuwaiti Parliament. Al-Khorafi suggested instead that the Prime Minister would reshuffle the Cabinet in the coming months. They both opposed a proposal to write off private loans and agreed that Minister of Information Mohammed Al-Sanousi would soon either resign or be booted out of office. End summary.

¶2. (C/NF) The Ambassador met separately December 6 with Speaker of Parliament Jassem Al-Khorafi and the Chairman of Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, MP Mohammed Jassem Al-Sager. Al-Khorafi said he was "very happy" that President Bush met with Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim, the Head of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Noting as well President Bush's recent meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki in Jordan and changes within the Administration, Al-Khorafi asked if these developments indicated the U.S. had developed a new strategy on Iraq or "are you just fishing?" The Ambassador emphasized that while we continue to evaluate our tactical approach, the U.S. strategy has not changed. Al-Khorafi urged the U.S. to clarify its policy publicly, arguing that not doing so would create confusion in the region and contribute to the impression that the U.S. was telling Arab leaders what to do rather than seeking their advice. He said there was also confusion about U.S. policy on Iran. The Ambassador responded that we were continuing to pursue a Chapter VII resolution and emphasized that we were committed to a diplomatic solution.

Read Out of Al-Khorafi Visit to Iran

¶3. (C/NF) Commenting on his recent participation in the

seventh annual Asian Parliaments' Association for Peace conference in Tehran, Al-Khorafi reported that he met separately with Iranian President Ahmadinejad, Lebanese Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, Palestinian Deputy Speaker of Parliament Ahmad Bahar, and Iraqi Speaker of Parliament Mahmoud Mashadani, whom he invited to visit Kuwait in the near future. Al-Khorafi said he was "very happy" that Ahmadinejad "went out of his way to stress the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program." Al-Khorafi encouraged Ahmadinejad to allay the concerns of Iran's neighbors and demonstrate clearly Iran's peaceful intentions. He also urged Iran to play a moderating role in Iraq. Al-Khorafi claimed Ahmadinejad "seemed to agree" with this advice, but told Al-Khorafi that the difficulty in Iraq was the Shia's lack of a "proper dialogue" with the Sunnis, primarily because "it is not obvious who they (the Sunnis) are." As he has on previous occasions, Al-Khorafi told the Ambassador that the U.S. should be "very delicate" when criticizing Iran since U.S. criticism often hurts "moderates" within the Iranian regime.

¶4. (C/NF) Al-Khorafi commented with some surprise on the evidence of close contacts between the Russians and the Iranians he noted while in Iran. Al-Khorafi believed Russia would "not easily go against them in the (UN) Security Council" and would "need a lot of time and pressure" to be convinced to vote for a sanctions resolution. He advised the U.S. not to bluff too much about obtaining a Chapter VII resolution against Iran. "If you don't succeed, it would be embarrassing to the U.S.," Al-Khorafi said. Asked about Iran's economy, he said, "I don't think they have a problem, but those problems they do have they seem to blame somehow on the 'American devil'."

Concerns about Situation in Lebanon

KUWAIT 00004612 002 OF 003

¶5. (C/NF) Al-Khorafi said he had a "frank" discussion with Berri, who expressed concern that the situation in Lebanon would get out of hand if the opposition took to the streets, as they did. According to Al-Khorafi, Berri tried unsuccessfully to negotiate with Saudi Arabia and Syria and left Iran "very disappointed" with the latest developments. Al-Khorafi warned that, like Iraq, sectarian tensions in Lebanon could escalate. "If the situation is left as it is now, (the opposition) will talk to the streets, not to each other." Al-Khorafi encouraged the U.S. to play a more active role with Saudi Arabia and Syria on Lebanon. "It is not enough to just say you back the Lebanese government," he stated. Al-Khorafi was optimistic, though, that a solution could eventually be reached.

¶6. (C/NF) Commenting on the situation in Lebanon, Al-Sager said his personal view was that King Abdullah of Jordan was correct: "the Shi'a, especially Iran, are trying to take control of the Arab world." As evidence, he cited the strength of Iranian-backed Shi'a in southern Iraq, Iranian support for Hamas' successful election bid, Iranian-backed Hizballah's alleged "victory" against Israel, and Iranian attempts to bail Syria out on the investigation into Rafiq Hariri's assassination. He argued that Hizballah should not/not be given a "minority veto" in Lebanon and encouraged the U.S. to continue supporting the Saudi and Egyptian approach.

¶7. (C/NF) Al-Sager said he was far more concerned about Syria than Iran, given that the Syrian regime was less pragmatic than the Iranian regime. He speculated that Syrian intelligence was behind the recent attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Damascus and expressed concern that Syria was willing to escalate tensions in Lebanon to relieve pressure from the International Court investigations. Iran, on the other hand, was more pragmatic and would ultimately accept a compromise deal, "even on the Bushehr plant," Al-Sager

argued. He believed Hizballah did not want a civil war because Iran did not and because the organization would lose its clout as a "popular resistance movement" if it began fighting other Lebanese groups.

Dissolution Unlikely; Writing Off Loans "Crazy"

¶18. (C/NF) Al-Sager downplayed rumors that the Amir might dissolve Parliament unconstitutionally for a period of up to three years, saying this would be "very tough" after elections in Iraq, Bahrain, and the Palestinian territories" and would mar Kuwait's reputation in the region. Al-Khorafi similarly dismissed the possibility of an unconstitutional dissolution and suggested instead that a Cabinet reshuffle was likely in the coming months. Al-Sager said pressure on the Government to write off the private loans of Kuwaiti citizens, which he estimated would cost 4.6 billion KD (\$16 billion), was "crazy," "inequitable," and "unjust." He continued: "If the Government accepts (this proposal), we will put the Prime Minister on the stand, no joke." Al-Khorafi also opposed writing off loans and predicted the proposal would not pass.

¶19. (C/NF) Although criticizing the Government's overall "weakness," Al-Sager praised the Prime Minister's recent cancellation of a number of public contracts due to alleged contract violations. He said the Government was "trying to do something great," but expressed doubt that it would succeed given the influence of the powerful business families' affected by the decision. Al-Khorafi differed with this view, saying that the Government's cancellation of these contracts was a "serious problem."

Information Minister "Living on Borrowed Time"

¶10. (C/NF) Both Al-Sager and Al-Khorafi agreed that Mohammed Al-Sanousi, the controversial Minister of Information who is expected to undergo a parliamentary "grilling" on December 18, was on his way out of the Cabinet. "He is living on borrowed time," Al-Sager said. "Not even the Government is defending him." Al-Khorafi believed Sanousi wanted to confront his critics, but predicted he would resign after the grilling.

Arab Parliament: Can't We All Just Get Along?

KUWAIT 00004612 003 OF 003

¶11. (C/NF) Asked about the Arab Parliament, Al-Sager, who serves as Speaker, said the assembly was focusing on advocating freedom of speech and press; mediating conflicts in the region; supporting Arab causes; and trying to implement "freedom," which he stressed was very different from "democracy." He claimed he was "in total control of the Arab Parliament" and said he spoke his own mind on regional issues, despite some parliamentarians' insistence that he represent their views. He said the Algerian, Yemeni, and Sudanese parliamentarians were a "pain in the neck" and very difficult to talk to. Nonetheless, "we are getting better," he stated. "At least now there is a dialogue and we can talk without fighting."

Bio Note

¶12. (C/NF) Tensions between the Al-Khorafi and Al-Sager families, arch political and business rivals, escalated recently when companies belonging to the Al-Khorafis engaged in a hostile take-over of several Al-Sager-owned and chaired companies. The issue has affected stock prices and has been referred to the judicial system for arbitration. Al-Sager took a defiant view when commenting on this issue, claiming he caught the Al-Khorafis making a big mistake. Al-Khorafi,

on the other hand, dismissed the controversy as a trivial issue.

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